

**THE DISCOURSE OF MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHER-
DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN THE NOVEL *ONE
TRUE THING* BY ANNA QUINDLEN¹**

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Abstract

The most successful novel by Anna Quindlen, *One True Thing* depicts issues relevant to the role of women in family and society, but mainly focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, their relationships with other family members and the community, as well as the reaction of the patriarchal society to different moral dilemmas such as euthanasia which is a central theme in this novel.

The novel *One True Thing* is a novel of dichotomization of female characters. The central theme is the bond between the mother Kate and the daughter Ellen growing stronger each day they spend together. The narrator of the story is the main heroine Ellen Gulden, who returns home to take care of her mother Kate, dying of cancer.

The aim of this research paper is to present the discourse of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship by using excerpts from the novel and analyzing them with the theories of discourse proposed by Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin and Diane Macdonell as well as the sociological and feminist theories represented mainly by the theories of Nancy Chodorow and Patrice DiQuinzio.

Key words: motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, society

¹ review scientific paper

Introduction

Anna Quindlen is an American novelist and journalist whose work has appeared both on fiction and non-fiction bestsellers lists. Her column *Public and private* won her a Pulitzer prize for journalistic text in 1992. The great talent provided her with the opportunity to become famous both for her columns as well as for her novels. Her novels are inspired mostly by her columns, which on the other hand are inspired by her real life. In most of them, she addresses questions which are universal to everyone. No matter whether it is about presenting problematic youth, domestic violence, disease or death, she puts the female characters in the center, fills them with empathy and makes them real. In one of his columns in the New Republic Magazine², the critic Lee Siegel names Quindlen “a monster of empathy” having the ability to domesticate and assimilate every distant tragedy and make it closer. He even coined the term “the Quindlen effect” for what he called her borrowing of other’s pain and talking about her own life.

Because of the major impact of the second wave of the feminist movement, the prevailing language in her novels is the language of dichotomy, which, as presented by many representatives of this movement, causes double feeling – resignation on one and demonstration of power on the other side. Such feeling called “contrary instinct” (Woolf, 1935) is visible in the work of many feminist authors in the second half of the last century, who regard the writing process as an act of liberation from the male influence. This power for Quindlen is liberation from the pressure of her predecessors such as Jane Austin and Bronte sisters, as well as the additional motive for action in the male-oriented journalistic society.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 1984) argue that the female authors are in a constant struggle with the prevailing patriarchal discourse. According to them, the struggle of the female author is not directed against the interpretation of the world by her male predecessor, but against the male interpretation of herself. In order to define herself as an author, she needs to re-define the conditions for her socialization. Thus, her struggle becomes something which is called *a revision* (Rich, 1975) – an act of looking backwards, revising old texts from new perspectives in order to re-define the position of the female author.

² <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/sweet-and-low> accessed January, 20, 2019

The most successful novel by Anna Quindlen, *One True Thing*, which is the object of our analysis, depicts certain topics relevant to the role of women in the society, but mostly it refers to mother-daughter relationship, their relationships with the other family members, the community and the reaction of the patriarchal society to the morality of certain social phenomena such as euthanasia which is central theme in this novel.

“Who knows what women can become when they are finally free to become themselves. Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? The time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women to become complete.” (Freidan, 1976)

This excerpt clearly defines the main aim of this paper. The search for a complete woman is the main motive of the author, who compares the two extremely different female characters and eventually defines the mother-daughter relationship through the prism of discourse theories. The main hypothesis of this study is that by “blending” the two female characters presented in the novel, we can be able to define the ways women are shaped by the family relations as well as by the society they live in. These processes clearly affect the perception of motherhood and the definition of mother-daughter relationship.

On one side there is the character of Ellen, a young unconventional woman, ready to fully change her comprehension of the role of women under the new circumstances she lives in, while on the other, there is Kate, a traditional woman who had made her choices and committed herself to her family and the home. Quindlen approaches this theme directly, with a usual sharpness and determination while presenting the two opposite perceptions of the women in general.

Theoretical background

Before moving to the main discussion on motherhood, we will briefly introduce the analytical framework to support the main argument of this paper. The term “discourse” as used here can closely be observed through the work of Diane Macdonnell who provides social definition of discourse. She bases her research on discourse on the work of several theoreticians among which the most predominant are Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault and comes to a

conclusion that the discourse is formed during our everyday activities. The way we talk and write is shaped by the structures of power in the society being defined as a constant battle and conflict among different discourses. The words, the expressions and the forms of knowledge applied in the institutions (the educational, the religious, the media), according to Macdonell, gain political dimension under the pressure of the forces in the society. Diane Macdonell shows how the central understanding of the discourse, as a political and social instrument can easily disperse into several different critical theories and ideologies. According to her, the predominant discourse in the society is formed under the influence of power.

The relationship between discourse and power is presented in the work of Nancy Chodorow, a sociologist and feminist who incorporates the psychoanalysis with a feminist perspective to understand the gender roles and more specifically the roles of women in the society. According to her, the female roles are mainly realized within the frames of the family and related to personal and emotional relationships. The ideology of women and their treatment by the society, especially in the area of labor force, stems from their position within the family and the suppositions that this position is exclusive to women only. Contrary to this, the male roles, defined by the society are not family-related. Even though both men and women are included in the domain of family life as well as in the social functioning, still, the women are primarily defined as mothers and wives; whereas the universal professional terms are “reserved” for men only. This is why the motherhood is positioned in the domain of the family relations, so it becomes a unique female phenomenon (Chodorow, 1978).

Motherhood is especially interesting theme intertwined within different understandings of the female identity. The process of pregnancy and giving birth are biological markers of the gender difference. The ideology of “intense motherhood” wraps around as a foil to the competitive search for an identity in the public and the professional sphere. This raises the social standards for the motherhood on an unrealistic level. Thus, mothers become responsible for raising children which is painstaking, emotional and financially expensive work. The great social ambivalence leads to the greater idealization of motherhood. (Hays, 1998).

According to the feminist theory, motherhood is sometimes considered an impossible concept. Being a mother and a person are two incompatible

identities in the modern social and political context, dominated by the prevailing ideology of individualism. The individualism forms the individual subjectivity as a combination of capacity, reason, consciousness or rational autonomy enabling rational, independent self-identification and acting. Thus the body is only an instrument, where as the subjectivity is fundamentally immaterial. It is also coherent, stable and unique and represents a source for political privilege and activity. Motherhood and subjectivity in contemporary culture are at odds with one another. Since the motherhood begins with the limitations of the pregnant body, it becomes impossible for a mother to be “a citizen” at the same time as being a mother. Mothers are not independent persons capable of political judgment. Thus, the motherhood is significant for the feminist theoreticians since it emphasizes the dilemma of “difference as opposed to equality” for many feminist issues. (DiQuinzio, 1999, Hays, 1998)

Mother – daughter relationship

Prior to presenting the peculiarities of the discourse of motherhood let us consider the relationship between the mother and the daughter which is an important factor that greatly outlined the course of our analysis.

One True Thing, the most successful novel by Anna Quindlen, as an object of our analysis represents many topics significant for describing the role and position of women in the family and the society, but most precisely it describes the mother-daughter relationship, their relationships to the other family members, to the community as well as the reaction of the patriarchal society to significant moral dilemmas such as mercy killing which is a central topic of this novel. Answering the question why she selected this theme and how she conducted research of the medical and legal aspects of euthanasia, the author gave the following reply:

“Odd as it may seem to some readers, I wanted to write a novel about the lives of women at the end of the twentieth century, in light of the modern feminist revolution. To me, Kate and Ellen represent the two polar ideas of women that arose at that time: the traditional woman, who embraced life as wife and mother alone; and the new woman, who rejected those roles in favor of a life in the world. Of course, as we all know now, what works for so many people is a

synthesis, something closer to the center. And I wanted to explore a series of events that would take Ellen there, or at least place her closer to some more balanced sense of what it means to be female. Originally I had the idea of the mother and daughter; it was only after some consideration that I decided to introduce the notion that the mother was dying, and the mystery about how she ultimately died. The first was an attempt to sharpen the characters of all involved. I believe that in fiction, as in life, people become most themselves under pressure.” (Quindlen, 1994)

The novel *One True Thing* is a novel of dichotomization of the female characters. The central theme of the novel is the relationship between the mother – Ellen and Kate - the daughter. The story’s narrator is the main heroine Ellen Gulden, a 24-year young woman who came back home to take care of her sick mother slowly being destroyed by a severe disease. The interesting fact is that it is not the role she takes up for herself, but it is suggested by her father, an English literature professor, who summons her from New York and takes her away from her career as a journalist. Ellen obeys her father’s will as usual. She has always been a daddy’s little girl raised up in the shadow of his erudition and charm. Her two brothers, one cheerful and joyous and the other quiet and withdrawn, secret homosexual are inclined towards the mother, which makes certain division in the family.

Being a mother and a wife, Kate is a modern incarnation of the Victorian female characters. She is a housewife, fully committed to her home and her family. In this sense, one of the purposes of the novel is to emphasize the important roles of women that were being neglected both in literature and in theory.

"The being happy," her mother explains. "It's so much easier, to learn to love what you have instead of yearning always for what you're missing, or what you imagine you're missing. It's so much more peaceful." (Quindlen, 1994, 226)

Ellen opposes the role of a traditional woman, such as her mother, but as the novel progresses, her character becomes completely transformed. Within the course of the few months she spends with her mother, she learns how to run the household, to care and nurture her ill mother. Sometimes they both read and analyze books together. By the book analyses, Ellen suddenly realizes her mother’s unexpected perception of the female characters of Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens etc. Through Kate one can see new ways of

acknowledging the female lives, much more humane than those of her erudite husband. It represents the moment when Ellen makes a complete shift in her attitude towards her parents. She entirely transfers her attention from her father to her mother. Even at the end of the novel she fully understands the real value of her mother and her complex role in the family.

The discourse of motherhood in *One True Thing*

In the novel *One True Thing* Ana Qundlen represents the motherhood as a social construct. She firstly defines raising children as a test of yes/no questions, which later becomes a multiple choice questions, ending with writing an infinite essay. Eventually, nobody knows anything. At the end, everyone should learn to trust him/herself. (Qundlen, 1994) .

With the characters of the mother and the daughter she represents the different social perception of a woman, being a mother and a housewife on one hand and a modern woman searching for her carrier opportunities on the other. The character of Kate represents the ideal of “a good mother”. She is a traditional woman who gave up her own future, committing herself completely to her home and her family. Opposite to her, her husband is so much absent from their home. Besides the fact, that he is financially providing his family, he is scarcely involved in the family’s everyday life and completely dedicated to his career.

Nancy Chodorow in her theoretical work *The Reproduction of motherhood* describes the state of men and women in the modern society through the prism of social presentation of the gender roles in the family and the society. According to her, the female roles are family-oriented and related to personal and emotional conditions. The ideology of women and their treatment by the society, especially as part of the labor market derives from their position within the family and supposes that it is exclusive to women. Opposite to that, the male roles, defined by the society are not family-oriented. Even though they have the roles of husbands and fathers, the ideology of men and the definition of their roles mainly derive from their social roles.

Patrice DiQuinzio goes beyond this statement that motherhood is a social construct. She coins the term “essential motherhood” which is closely related to the femininity and is thus natural and unavoidable to women. It has the need for female exclusiveness and undivided attention and care for children which is based on the female psychological and emotional capacity for empathy, awareness for the needs of others and self-sacrifice. The subjectivity of personality requires unified, selfish and rational agent. But the motherhood which begins with the limitations of the pregnant body neither remains a unity, nor provides an opportunity for such interpretation. As a result, motherhood and subjectivity in modern culture are at odds with each other. Hence, motherhood is significant for the feminist theoreticians since it emphasizes the dilemma “difference as opposed to equality” for many feminist issues.

DiQuinzio refuses this dichotomy in favor of the “paradoxical politics of motherhood”. According to her theory the motherhood faces the challenge of theorizing the embodied subjectivity. Instead of the body and spirit being different in pursuit of superiority, the politics of motherhood take seriously the ways in which the mind and the body are constituted mutually. Thus subjectivity becomes partial, incomplete and even contradictory.

“When someone asks you where you come from, the answer is your mother... When your mother’s gone, you’ve lost your past. It’s so much more than love. Even when there’s no love, it’s so much more than anything else in your life.” (Quindlen, 1994, 350)

At this point, the novel *One True Thing* opens a new possibility for defining the subjectivity of the mother. It complicates and re-examines the modern archetype of “a good mother”. One possible interpretation of the female subjectivity is the initial resistance of the daughter towards her mother. This can easily be described with what is called “a paradoxical politics of motherhood” by DiQuinzio.

Kate does not make reckless and fast compromises. Ellen sees that her mother is extremely strong and sharp minded.

„It takes a long list to show the things she did for me, and more importantly the things she did not do so they can be attributed to her, as the

lectures about women in the works of Dickens can be attributed to my father... Our parents are never people to us.“ (Quindlen, 1994, 350)

By understanding the subjectivity of both parents, especially the mother, Ellen creates her own opinion of motherhood. She gradually understands that she saw her mother through the prism of what is called “essential motherhood” (DiQuinzio, 1999) as emphasized by the society, according to which the mother is the one who exists to always nurture someone else, to make sacrifices, to support creating of someone else’s subjectivity unconditionally. “We’d made her simpler all her life, simpler than her real self. We’d made her what we needed her to be. We’d made her ours, our one true thing.” (Quindlen, 1994, 228)

The female characters in *One True Thing* are gifted with heart the same as with reason. It would be completely wrong to make them choose between heart and reason, public and private, subjectivity and motherhood. Thus, with the character of Kate the author makes delicate transition from subjectivity and motherhood. She is not fully passive and dependent as it seems, but she makes her own choice about when and how she would reaffirm herself. It marks her existence and thus strongly influences her daughter. Quindlen uses the character of Ellen to represent the painful quest for the lost identity which is greatly influenced by her mother’s death. At the end of the novel Ellen finally knows who she is:

“The irony was that before she was ill I had been so sure of who I was, of what I wanted. I was George Gulden’s daughter and I wanted to make him love me. And in many ways I am still very much like him. But I am also the last living member of the Gulden Girls Book and Cook Club, and I will never forget it, nor be the same for it.” (Quindlen, 1994, 376)

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to defend the premise that the motherhood can be explained by certain theories of discourse related to some social and feminist modern theories, which describe the concept of motherhood as a social construct. Relying on the theories of Diane McDowell, Nancy Chodorow, Patrice DiQuinzio, Adrienne Rich, Betty Friedan and other feminist

theorists we tried to outline the main aspects of motherhood as presented in the novel *One True Thing*.

The novel *One True Thing* is narrated from the daughter's perspective. It represents the complete transformation of the daughter at times when she faces the great tragedy in her life – the death of her mother. Even though she considers herself strong and independent, she completely changes her points of view under the influence of the time she spends with her mother before her life ends.

It seems that the search for a complete woman, as the main motif of the author, ends after confronting the two extremely different female worlds. On one side, there's a young unconventional woman, changing her beliefs under the influence of the circumstances she lives in, while on the other side, there is one traditional woman who chooses to devote herself to domestic life. Quindlen approaches this theme directly, with a usual clarity and determination, presenting the two opposite female characters. Ellen tells her story after the death of her mother and after being publicly charged to have helped her mother's murder by giving her a large dosage of morphine. Her feelings are so neatly and cautiously presented and can easily show the struggle that initiated and shaped her feminine role. Being a "new" woman at the end, she tells her story with the feeling of owing everything to her mother. Her mother shaped her and helped her on the way to becoming a complete woman.

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